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MYSTICISM IN PRESENT-DAY RELIGION ¹

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These opening years of the twentieth century have been marked by a profound revival of interest in Mysticism, though we are perhaps not yet justified in speaking of a distinct revival of Mysticism itself. This revival of interest in Mysticism can be traced to no one explanatory cause, but is due to a confluence of many contributory streams of influence. Our expanding historical knowledge has very freshly brought to light the important part which Mysticism has played in the religious life of the world, and especially in the nineteen centuries of Christian development. A group of psychological researches has aroused an immense interest in the inner life, and particularly in the deep-lying regions of the subconscious, where vast sources of hidden spiritual energy appear to lie. The prevailing tendencies in philosophy—common to many schools—to attack “in-

¹ Von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908); *Eternal Life* (1912).

Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (1911); *The Mystic Way* (1913).

W. K. Fleming, *Mysticism in Christianity* (1913).

W. H. Dyson, *Studies in Mysticism* (1913).

E. Lehmann, *Mysticism in Heathendom and Christendom* (translated by Hunt, 1910).

H. Delacroix, *Études d'histoire et de psychologie du mysticisme* (1908).

Joseph Zahn, *Einführung in die Christliche Mystik* (1908).

W. E. Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (1912).

Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (1908); *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (1914).

tellectualism," to humble the claims and pretensions of "knowledge," and to exalt, on the other hand, intuition, first-hand experience, knowledge of acquaintance, appreciation, and valuation, have given aid and comfort to those who prefer the "heart" to the "head."

But beyond question, the present-day collapse of the traditional elements in religion has had by far the greatest influence in shifting to the inner way the direction of man's quest for God. Science has sternly shaken men awake from their childish dreams of a God above the sky or back of special creations. Every clue in the hand of science leads outward, or backward to bottomless infinities—not to a God who began the series. In like manner, exact, historical methods of research have shattered the old conceptions of "dispensations," divine interferences, and specially chosen races, and have forced us either to consider all history sacred or, as an alternative, to count all history secular. They have, further, robbed us of our easy faith in infallible sources of knowledge about God and the world and life and the hereafter. Finally, by an irresistible maturing of mind the world has outgrown the theory of the church which made *it* an infallible guarantor of truth concerning eternal realities and the dread issues of the life to come. Men have found themselves compelled to discover the sources of truth and the resources of life within themselves, or, failing in that momentous undertaking, to flounder about in the fog, strangers to unfailing lights and unsetting stars.

This present return to Mysticism is, however, in marked contrast to the mystical movement of the pre-Reformation epoch, or to that of the counter-Reformation in Spain, Italy, and France, or, finally, to that of the spiritual reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In all three of those characteristically different movements the leaders and exponents were themselves luminous

mystics who interpreted their own experiences, while today, on the other hand, very few first-hand prophets of mystical religion have appeared among us and our movement has been in the main confined to the historical and psychological interpretation of Mysticism as revealed in the autobiographies and expositions of dead prophets; though this may be, and probably is, the necessary preliminary stage to a far profounder *return* to a religion of the inner way.

The definitions of Mysticism which have been proposed by the recent writers are still somewhat vague and hazy and leave the way-faring man confused as to its real scope and nature. But one important point receives strong emphasis in the writings of the leading present-day interpreters of Mysticism, namely, that it is a heightened, intensified way of life, a distinct life-variation. Evelyn Underhill makes an unsatisfactory attempt at definition in her chapter on "The Characteristics of Mysticism," where she calls Mysticism in its pure form "the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute;" and she says that "the end which the mystic sets before him on his pilgrimage is conscious union with a living Absolute."¹ But the moment Mysticism is called a "science of ultimates," or a science of anything else, it seems to be handed over to that very "intellectualism" against which it is a protest, and as soon as the goal of the soul's pilgrimage is declared to be union with an Absolute, it is difficult psychologically to see how it can still be "a *conscious* union." She is much more successful farther on in this chapter, where she contends that Mysticism is not an opinion, not a philosophy, not occult knowledge, but *an organic life-process*, something which the whole self does, a way to enhanced life; not merely admission to an overwhelming vision of Truth but rather an ordered movement toward higher levels

¹ *Mysticism*, p. 86.

of Reality, which is arrived at by a definite and arduous psychological process—the so-called Mystic Way.¹

In her second book, this "Mystic Way" is expounded and illustrated through concrete examples of persons who have lived by their "conviction of an over-world," who have "sent exploring tentacles into the unseen" and have found the Reality their passionate souls sought after. These mystics she describes as persons who exhibit "a fortunate variation of the race," persons who reveal an *élan vital*, an internal push which has carried life forward to a higher form and a higher destiny. "Under the spur of their vivid faculty of intuition," she continues, "they gather up all their being and thrust it forward—the whole personality, not its sharp intellectual tip alone—on a new free path. Hence it is that they live and move in worlds to us unrealized; see other aspects of the many-levelled, many-colored world of Reality. Living with an intensity which is beyond the scope of 'normal' men, deeper and deeper layers of existence are revealed to them."² On this theory of Mysticism as the emergence of a new type-level of life, she finds her supreme examples in the loftiest spiritual genuises of the race—in Jesus, in Paul, and in the author of the Johannine writings.

Von Hügel's masterful studies of the problems of religion do not furnish any ready-made definitions, nor does he ever admit that there is a distinct and differentiated *mystic way* on which the soul can successfully make its pilgrimage home to God. For him all adequate religion involves three elements—the historical and institutional element; the analytic and speculative element; the emotional and volitional element, or experimental element. This third deep interior and unanalyzable element of

¹ Mysticism, pp. 96, 97.

² The Mystic Way, p. 12. The reader notes everywhere in Evelyn Underhill the profound influence both of Bergson and Eucken.

human personality is, he says, always in evidence, and bears as its deepest characteristic a sense of and hunger for the Infinite. Through all the deeper and nobler movements of our wondrously various inner life, he says, obscure but profoundly powerful instincts and impressions of God work and operate, by which man discovers God to be his deepest ideal, and at the same time his true congenital element and environment.¹ This experimental or mystic aspect of personality brings into function the deep-lying intuitions of the soul, the active surge of the will toward its ideal, the inner response of the finite to the infinite, and supplies to the religious life an element of religion which is rather felt than seen or reasoned about, is loved and lived rather than analyzed, is action and power rather than either external fact or intellectual verification.² The mission of the Mystics, then, "who are the great benefactors of our race," is, in Von Hügel's judgment, to bear personal and experimental testimony to the presence of the Infinite in man and to awaken men to the significance of this "operative consciousness."³ He finds, however, four tendencies in the Mystics which have lessened the full value of their ministry. They tend (1) to find their joy in recollective moments of the soul, and so to neglect or unduly to minimize the contact of mind and will with things of sense; (2) to rise above succession and clock-time and to approximate eternity, the one great Now, and thus to slight the importance of history; (3) to find their joy in pure receptivity, with a constant bent toward Quietism, and thus to ignore the truth that God can be apprehended only by the persistent and many-sided moral and spiritual activity of the whole self; and (4) to find their joy in so exalting the difference between the finite and infinite, between man's nature and God's, and in so in-

¹ *The Mystical Element of Religion*, Vol. II, pp. 346, 349.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 531.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 340.

sisting on the incomprehensibility of God as to cut away all ground for any experience or knowledge of what God is or is not.¹

Delacroix asserts that Mysticism is not tied to any one religion, people, or historic period, but is a native trait, springing out of certain fundamental tendencies of human nature.² The Mystics of the highest rank, he holds, have been persons possessed of creative power, of extraordinary psychological organization, of rare genius, and they have succeeded, without themselves knowing how, in expanding their being and in pushing out into a new dimension of life.³ These supreme spiritual geniuses have moments of absorption in God, when they seem to attain a union with the divine, but ecstasy was not their aim; their central ambition was rather to make of their souls divine instruments, places where the divine power could dwell and incarnate itself—in short, they aimed at nothing less than to become, in their measure, *Christs*, persons in whom own-self was annihilated and in whom God could reveal Himself.⁴ True Christian Mysticism is thus for Delacroix, not something pathological, not a state of self-initiated ecstasy, but a new level of life-power. "Christian Mysticism," he says, "substitutes for ecstasy a wider state, in which the permanent consciousness of God does not suspend practical activity, in which definite action and thought spring out of the inner deeps, in which the disappearance of the feeling of self-hood and the spontaneous and impersonal character of the thoughts and motor-tendencies impress the subject with the idea that these acts do not originate from him but from a divine Source, and that it is God who lives and acts within him."⁵ Mysticism, for Delacroix, is an organizing power, a higher variation of life.⁶ Hocking too

¹ The Mystical Element of Religion, Vol. III, pp. 284-287.

² Op. cit., p. i.

³ Ibid., p. iii.

⁴ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁵ Ibid., p. xi.

⁶ Ibid., pp. xviii, xix.

calls attention to *enhanced life* as a characteristic of Mysticism, though his main interest in Mysticism is plainly in its cognitive value. It is, he says, a way of recovering the natural vigor of the *whole-idea* (which ordinary consciousness and empirical pursuits break up and shatter), and thus it is a recovery of the full worth of life.¹ Mysticism, he says again, is "deed and not doctrine; it is a way of dealing with God; it is a process by which the central unity of the soul meets the Central Unity of the World."²

As soon, however, as we turn to the vast collections of first-hand "material" which the interpreters of Mysticism have gathered, we discover that there is a profound distinction to be made between the *mystical experience* and "Mysticism." The mystical experience which, indeed, is life at its highest level of inward unity, feels as though the usual insulations of the narrow individual life were broken through and as though actual contact were attained with an enfolding Presence, life-giving, joy-bringing, and light-supplying. All the deep-lying powers of the inward self, usually so divergent and conflicting—the foreground purposes defeated by background inhibitions and by doubts on the border—become liberated and unified into one conscious life, which is not merely intellectual nor merely volitional nor solely emotional, but an *undivided whole of experience*, intensely joyous, enriched with insight and pregnant with deeds of action.³

"Historical Mysticism," on the other hand, as is implied in Evelyn Underhill's first definition—"Mysticism is the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute"—involves a certain metaphysical conception of God and carries, further, a doctrine of the "way" to union with Him. God, according to the metaphysi-

¹ Op. cit., p. 419.

² Ibid., pp. 354, 355.

³ This account of the mystical experience is quite similar to that given in the Introduction to my *Spiritual Reformers*; see especially pp. xx, xxi.

cal conception which underlies "historical mysticism" is absolute Reality, that which Is, Pure Being. In order to maintain the absoluteness of God, it seemed necessary to insist on His immutability and His oneness, as opposed to all duality or plurality or otherness. To find Him, therefore, the face of the seeker must be sternly turned away from all finite things, all transitory happenings, all passing states of mind, all that is *here* or *now*, all that can be seen or felt or known or named. The Absolute, by processes of elimination, seemed best conceived as "a nameless Nothing," "an undifferentiated One," "an abysmal Dark," "the Silent desert of the Godhead where no one is at home." All Christian Mysticism that came under Neoplatonic influences—and that includes pretty much the whole of Roman Catholic Mysticism from St. Augustine to Madame Guyon—is profoundly marked by this characterless Absolute at the centre—a God who is everything which finite things are not—and is consequently committed to a *via negativa* as the only way up to Him. This *negative way* is taken by many interpreters to be the real differentia of Mysticism, and the whole mystical process is thought of as the pilgrimage of "the alone to the Alone"—the merging of an abstract self with an abstract Absolute.

But this abstract and negative cast is by no means confined to Mysticism. It is involved in the very structure of all metaphysical thinking that follows the track of Eleatic, Platonic, and Neoplatonic philosophy. This great intellectual movement insisted that That which Is—*Tò ὄν*—is one, permanent, immutable, and free from all becoming. Mind, in order to know Reality, must itself be that Reality, and therefore if we human beings can rise from our world of shadows, from our cave-dwelling, and perceive That which Is, it is because there is something in the soul unsundered from that Reality which it

seeks. But this dialectic consummation is attained only by processes of rising above and sloughing off the finite and the mutable, so that the individual of necessity arrives at his goal with empty hands. This metaphysic lay at the heart of Mysticism no doubt, but it lay at the heart of all mediaeval dialectic as well, and Mysticism took the negative way because, for the fearless and venturesome seeker who was determined to cut all cables and swing clear out to sea with God, there was no other way. It has taken all the philosophical and spiritual travail of the centuries to discover the possibility of a concrete Infinite—a God of character, interrelated with us and with the world—and to find that the way to share in His immanent and comprehending Life is as much a way of affirmation as of negation. Mysticism will not be revived and become a powerful present-day force until it is liberated from its age-long alliance with classical philosophy and translated into the thought-terms of our time.

This tendency, to which I have alluded, to define Mysticism as a life-type, is a movement in the right direction, for all life-types conform to their changing environment. But unfortunately much of the work of present-day interpretation carries on consciously or unconsciously the abstract, dialectic, and negative features which doom Mysticism to remain an affair of books. Evelyn Underhill, whose work is everywhere characterized by wide knowledge of sources, profound insight, and rich experience, is, I feel, too much under the spell of the outworn thought-forms through which the great mystics whom she loves endeavored to utter themselves. Both of her books are committed to a well-marked, sharply-defined “mystic way.” It is a *way* which many mystics of the past have taken, but it is esoteric and more or less artificial, not grounded in the inherent nature of the soul and not a universal highway for the

whole race of the saved. The "ladders" of mystical ascent, the carefully labelled stages of the way, are the creation of dialectic rather than of religious experience, and one feels how artificial they are when an attempt is made, as in *The Mystic Way*, to fit the mighty life-experiences of Christ and of St. Paul and of the author of the Fourth Gospel into these mystical model-forms and to make them follow the "purgative," the "illuminative" and the "unitive" stages.

The modern studies in this field have, I think, convincingly shown that Mysticism cannot safely be isolated and made a "way" either of knowledge or of life. Both life and knowledge are far too rich and many-leveled to be reduced to one elemental aspect of experience. There can be no doubt, to those who have been there, that there do come moments of mystical opening, fresh bubbleings of the stream of life, swift insights, the inrush of new energies, when the soul feels an irresistible surge of certainty. But it is as impossible to live by inarticulate experiences alone as it would be to live physically on ozone alone. The actual *content* of religious faith, the definite beliefs which give us marching direction, the concrete ideas which furnish body and filling to our religion, the whole structure of our thought of God and of the world and of man and of duty and of eternal destiny, are the slow accretions of racial experience and do not come to us by the secret door of mystical openings. In so far as mystics receive definite "openings," with concrete content, they are likely to be the product of group-influence. They are gestated by the literature on which the mystic has fed himself, or they are suggested by the social environment in which he is saturated, or they have subconsciously ripened within under the maturing guidance of expectation. It is always possible to show that the content of the mystic's insights has a history, as our ideals of right and wrong have and as our ideals in art

and literature have. What the mystic delivers to us as his positive contribution is an interpretation of his experience, not the experience itself; and what he brings to us is always heavily laden with the immemorial gains of the spiritual travails of men behind him. Mysticism, in its full historical meaning, is as much a slow accretion, a group-product, as is art or grammar or mathematics.

But the mystical experience itself as it bursts upon the soul is a unifying, fusing, intensifying inward event. It may not bring new facts, it may open no door to oracular communications, it may not be a gratuitous largess of knowledge; but it enables a soul to *see* what it knows, to seize by a sudden insight the long results of slow-footed experience, to get possession of regions of the self which are ordinarily beyond its hail, to fuse its truth with the heat of conviction and to flood its elemental beliefs with a new depth of feeling. This dynamic inward event is not dependent upon any peculiar stock of ideas and is not confined to what is usually called the purview of religion; it is the sudden transcendence of our usual fragmentary island of reality and the momentary discovery of the *whole* to which we belong. We can best help our age toward a real revival of Mysticism as an elemental aspect of religious life, not by formulating an esoteric "mystic way," not by clinging to the outgrown metaphysic to which Mysticism has been allied, but by emphasizing the reality of mystical experience, by insisting on its healthy and normal character, and by indicating ways in which such dynamic experiences can be fostered and realized.